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Should I Preach from a Lectionary? Yes!

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

If the question is directed to me, the answer is a resounding “Yes!” I do not otherwise have the initiative, imagination, wisdom, or skill to go my own way. I am grateful that the lectionary exists as a basis for my own homiletical discipline.

But the question behind the question is whether a case can be made that every preacher should preach from a lectionary. And there, I suppose, the answer is not so simple. There may well be preachers who follow some other kind of discipline, whether self-imposed or somehow communally agreed upon with others, that is entirely satisfactory.

My point is that the use of “a” (as opposed to “the”) lectionary is a matter of discipline and of accountability to the congregation on the part of the preacher, not a matter of observing some law. Nevertheless, I think that, for most preachers, making consistent use of “the lectionary” in common use among major denominations in North America—known as the Revised Common Lectionary—meets those criteria of discipline and accountability best. There are several reasons for that.

1. The Wisdom of the Ages. Lectionaries have existed since early times in the life of the church. In fact, they existed in Jewish tradition prior to and alongside the rise of early Christianity. Already in the writings of Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian there are references to readings from the law, the prophets, and the gospels as regular components of Christian worship. Those writers may not be referring to existing lectionaries, but there can be no doubt that certain texts were regularly meshed with the observance of festivals (Easter, Pentecost, Epiphany, etc.) from early on. By the fourth century, actual lectionaries had come into being for the churches of the East and of the West. During and after the Reformation, the lectionary was preserved, even if trimmed and reformed, by Lutheran and various other Protestant churches.

Historical precedent is not by itself a convincing argument for preserving anything. Yet it has seemed wise through the centuries for Christians to agree that certain biblical texts should be aligned with Sundays of the year. That becomes rather obvious in the case of festivals, even if it is less so for other Sundays.

2. Opening the “Treasurers of the Bible” Lavishly. Along with Roman Catholics, Protestants should be grateful for the reforms of Vatican II. The “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” of 1963 prescribed that “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly” and, to that end, the Scriptures are to be read “over a set cycle of years.” Those initiatives gave birth to (1) the use of readings from the Old

(continued on page 444)

TO FACE

Should I Preach from a Lectionary? Why?

MARK A. THRONTVEIT

As the author of several books and articles purporting to help pastors “preach from the lectionary,” some in this very publication, readers of *Word & World* may be surprised to find me plowing this end of the field. Students, however, will not. I frequently confess in classes that “I always read the suggested lectionary readings...before I preach on something else.” While my delightfully cynical, if not downright contrarian, nature undoubtedly plays a major role here, neither DNA nor the old Adam can fully account for my disenchantment with the prescribed readings. Two rants will suffice:

1. The most common argument for lectionary preaching claims that such discipline prevents pastors from “riding homiletical hobbyhorses,” that is, the church’s prior selection of texts guarantees that pastors will preach the full breadth of the biblical witness. Hmm . . . the full breadth of the biblical witness? Close examination of the Revised Common Lectionary reveals that two-thirds of the Old Testament readings come from six books (Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, Isaiah, and Jeremiah), with almost half of these coming from Isaiah alone. Twenty-eight books are represented by three or fewer readings, and ten of these twenty-eight do not appear at all. Two-thirds of the Epistle readings come from six books (Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Hebrews). The Gospels, naturally, are more fully represented, but one can scarcely speak about the full breadth of Scripture. One might ask how this differs from other, more blatant impositions of a “canon within the canon” upon the church. In any case, the lectionary does not guarantee that pastors will *preach* from the full breadth of Scripture, it merely suggests that these texts will be *read*. There is, lamentably, nothing to prevent pastors from dutifully reading all three lectionary texts and then holding forth on the occult seduction of *Harry Potter*, “what’s wrong with the ELCA,” or the impish antics of their three-year-olds.

2. All canons within the canon have an underlying hermeneutic that governs what is included and what is omitted. These assumptions are rarely made explicit, but in the case of the *RCL* one wonders about theological motivations. One especially egregious example will have to do. The Old Testament reading for Advent 4 in Year B is 2 Sam 7:1–11, 16, God’s dynastic promise to David. At issue is the omission of verses 12–15:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will estab-

(continued on page 446)

Testament and the singing (or reading) of a Psalm along with Epistle and Gospel readings and (2) the three-year lectionary. Many of us recall the days when the only readings heard were the Epistle and Gospel, and they were repeated year in and year out. But now we hear much more. Although two- and four-year lectionaries were considered, the three-year lectionary was decided upon for rather practical reasons. A two-year lectionary would not do justice to the amount of material in the Old Testament, and a four-year lectionary would be too much for the New. The three-year lectionary is a happy compromise, offering a wide range of readings throughout the Bible. Although no lectionary will satisfy everyone, the lectionary currently in use is an admirable achievement.

3. *Playing the Hand We Are Dealt.* The lectionary makes it necessary for clergy and congregations to deal with texts of all kinds in the Bible, even some that are not easy to preach on. The temptation of every preacher is to take up texts and topics that are comfortable, familiar, or an easy fit with his or her theological and social views. But the preacher who follows the lectionary will have to stretch on occasion. There are times when a text offers a direct challenge to one's preconceived formulas and views. Engaging such texts is an opportunity for growth both for the preacher and for the congregation. Further, it is not likely that the sheer breadth of scriptural teaching, whether challenging or consoling, would be matched by any one preacher's choice of texts apart from the lectionary.

4. *Common Ecumenical Reading.* Following a common lectionary provides for common reading and study with colleagues. Clergy can come together with colleagues of their own denomination and with those of other denominations for common study of the texts for the coming Sunday. The common lectionary generates continuing-education events devoted to the study of the Scriptures that would not otherwise happen. Moreover, one often hears that laypersons of different denominations in a community sometimes (or even regularly) compare notes concerning what the pastor said in the sermon the previous Sunday, thereby conversing about matters related to the Christian faith.

5. *Helping People Read the Bible.* Christians should read the Bible, but the Bible is huge, and for many it is complex. Where to begin? Putting nostalgia aside, it is simply not true that most people spend time reading the Bible in their homes. For the vast majority, the only reading of the Bible they ever experience is what is read to (or with) them in worship. It is incumbent then that "the treasures of the Bible...be opened up more lavishly" in worship. ⊕

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lish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. (2 Sam 7:12–15 NRSV)

I suggest that “When he commits iniquity” (14b) accounts for the omission of these four verses. Paired with the announcement of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:26–38), and appearing in the context of Advent, the “he,” it is assumed, can only refer to Jesus, “David’s greater son,” and we all know that “he” did not “commit iniquity.” Since this conflicts with what we know to be true, the lectionary simply skips over this disconcerting aspect of the text. The deuteronomistic author of 2 Samuel, however, was thinking of Solomon, here, not Jesus, and in the same author’s 1 Kings 11 we can read how Solomon excelled in iniquity. The Chronicler was troubled by this verse as well (he omits it!), not because of its implications with regard to Jesus, but because of what it said about Solomon, who is idealized in Chronicles. Riding roughshod over the Old Testament text is hard enough to explain with inspired authors such as the Chronicler; we do not need to compound the problem with our own “creative” readings of holy writ.

I’ll simply mention that when I entered “pericopes” (the individual texts that comprise the lectionary) the first time in this essay my word processor automatically changed it to “periscopes” (“Dive! Dive!”); and that *pericope* in its classical Greek sense meant “a cutting around; *mutilation*” (Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged [London: Oxford, 1966] 549, emphasis added).

We may applaud such goals as ecumenical uniformity, efficient worship planning, or a secure body of Sunday readings for denominational publishing houses to exploit with canned sermons and “exegetical helps,” that shared texts might foster. Preachers newly hatched from the seminary egg could do worse than attending to the lectionary’s presentation of the Bible for three years, as they get a feel for interpreting God’s word in the contexts to which they have been called. But after that, why not immerse yourself in the text as it came to us, whole and unexpurgated? Wrestle with God’s wrath and Jesus’ cursing the fig tree. Discover a God who “hates” evil. Rejoice with Elijah’s triumph over Ba’al on Mt. Carmel or the repentance of Manasseh.

“Should I preach from a lectionary?” No, you should preach from the Bible. Try it; you (and your congregation) may like it! ⊕

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